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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANTANANARIVO 000849

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: MADAGASCAR: PRESIDENT AND MAYOR TAKING THEIR GLOVES OFF

REF: A. 08 ANTANANARIVO 644

[1](#)B. 08 ANTANANARIVO 691

Classified By: AMBASSADOR NIELS MARQUARDT FOR REASONS 1.4 B AND D.

[11.](#) (C) SUMMARY: The year-long feud between Antananarivo Mayor Andry Rajoelina and President Marc Ravalomanana entered a new and more volatile chapter on the one year anniversary of Rajoelina's 2007 election. Following the GOM's surprise closure on December 13 of VIVA TV, owned by Rajoelina, the embattled mayor has at least temporarily united the fractured opposition, and appears to be positioning himself as a national rallying point not just for press freedom, but for broader concerns over deterioration in the rule of law and human rights. Ravalomanana's concurrent determination to press ahead with previously planned political reforms pushed Madagascar's parties into an awkward choice between competing events during the week: a high-profile meeting of opposition parties on Tuesday and a press conference on Wednesday afternoon with the Mayor, or a financially rewarding consultation with the President on Wednesday morning. In the event, all but one of the major opposition and centrist parties joined the Mayor (the CRN of former president Albert Zafy being the notable exception), while the lesser known parties took the opportunity to curry Presidential favor. By the morning of December 19, rumors were circulating of an arrest warrant for the Mayor for his unauthorized political meeting, but with his strengthening support base, that may prove one step too far. In any case, both sides are taking the gloves off, with the possibility that the Mayor will now reveal highly incendiary information about City Hall corruption under his predecessors there, including President Ravalomanana. END SUMMARY.

A YEAR AND A WEEK

[12.](#) (C) Mayor Rajoelina never had a honeymoon. Since the moment of his victory over the ruling TIM party candidate in December 2007 (ironically winning on Ravalomanana's 58th birthday), his tenure has been defined by a series of confrontations with President Ravalomanana and his government and party (reflets), leading to a very public standoff in September 2008. With the help of a respected intermediary, Norbert Ratsirahonana of the centrist AVI party, the two sides reached a fragile truce, and the three months since have been relatively quiet. A brief spat in November over the city's garbage collection service was uncomfortably reminiscent of previous conflicts, but Deputy Mayor Nirhy Lanto Andriamahazo outmaneuvered the government's attempts to blame poor administration for an alleged case of plague in the capital.

[13.](#) (C) Marking the end of a long year in office, Rajoelina

addressed a crowd of supporters at Mahamasina stadium on the afternoon of December 13. He stated that his administration still had big plans for the city, and that it could do better than the previous administrations if only the president would let him do his job -- an often heard theme from the mayor and his allies. That night, Rajoelina's VIVA television station broadcast a speech by former president Didier Ratsiraka, previously recorded in Paris on December 2, in which he criticized the president and his administration, denouncing Madagascar's extreme poverty, lack of democracy, difficult business environment, and alleged human rights abuses. At 2230 that evening, police came to VIVA and confiscated the video, and returned at 2330 with an order from the Ministry of Telecommunications, Posts, and Communication to shut down the station.

¶4. (C) The order declared that the broadcast would "disturb order and public security", although other media outlets had published or broadcast excerpts earlier in the week, without response from the administration. Rajoelina immediately cried foul, and both domestic and international press gave the closure wide publicity, with well-known political and civil society figures supporting the station and denouncing the closure as politically motivated. The government remained largely silent on the matter, not wanting it to overshadow the president's political reform initiatives, which were to have taken center stage this week. It did, however, rather lamely explain that the distinction between VIVA and other radio and TV stations was that VIVA had broadcast the Ratsiraka interview in its entirety, while others diffused only excerpts, hence its closure while others went unscathed.

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OFF THE FENCE AND INTO THE FIRE

¶5. (C) To date, Rajoelina had disavowed any allegiance to the "opposition", preferring instead to walk a middle line between the government and the numerous, disorganized parties that hitherto had been unable to decide on a common strategy, a political platform, or even a leader they could all support. Capitalizing on the national exposure and widespread support he had suddenly acquired, Rajoelina ended this neutrality and called a meeting on December 16 of what has been dubbed the "Group of 20". Leaders of every major opposition party except Albert Zafy's CRN were in attendance, including such notables as Roland Rasiraka (nephew of the former president, who flew in from Tamatave for the event), Henri Lecacheur (recently given a suspended sentence for holding an unauthorized political rally in Antananarivo), Jean Lahiniriko (head of PSDUM, and runner-up in the 2006 presidential election) and other well-known heads of political parties and civic organizations. Rajoelina announced that he would release a declaration, but spoke out against demonstrations, stating that he wanted to give the administration a chance to respond.

¶6. (C) The following morning, Ravalomanana held a meeting of political parties to discuss reforms, a process he had launched two weeks prior. All of the parties present at the Group of 20 declined to attend, leaving only minor and mostly unknown parties to attend, along with Zafy's CRN. They were rewarded with 10 million ariary each in support of the reform process, but it played in the media as a down-payment on loyalty rather than a serious initiative for reform that actually does have fairly broad support.

¶7. (C) That afternoon, December 17, Rajoelina held a press conference, releasing a brief statement condemning the "dictatorship" in the country, and calling for the reopening of not only VIVA, but also other broadcast media that had been closed in the last year. It also specifically takes issue with inequality in the application of the law, citing discrepancies between the treatment of the rich and the poor, and calls for equal rights to operate national media -- which

is currently only granted to media controlled by the president, allegedly in violation of current media law.

COOL HEADS GIVE WAY

¶8. (C) In a private conversation with poloff, Deputy Mayor Andriamahazo declared that the gloves were off: Rajoelina would challenge the VIVA ruling in court, but the issue is now bigger than just the TV station. Even if VIVA is allowed to reopen, they will still seek broader media freedom. If their requests are not addressed, they will demonstrate in the street, and if their demonstrations aren't authorized, they will hold them regardless. In addition, the Mayor had previously refrained from releasing documentation of the previous (TIM) administrations' alleged corruption and financial mismanagement at City Hall that they uncovered in an audit conducted immediately after Rajoelina's election. The Mayor now intends to release this information, according to Andriamahazo.

¶9. (C) On Friday, December 19, embassy contacts reported the existence of an arrest warrant for Rajoelina and four of his supporters, for holding an unauthorized political meeting (that of the 16th): Nadine Ramaroson and Roland Razafindramanitra of the Economic and Social Council, and Elia Ravelomanantsoa and Ny Hasina Andriamanjato of the mayor's office. Post was unable to confirm that the warrant had been issued, but at time of writing no arrests have yet been made.

STAKES ARE CLEAR, RULES OF GAME LESS SO

¶10. (C) COMMENT: The Group of 20, with Rajoelina at the head, now -- and rather suddenly -- represents the most influential and well-organized assembly of opposition figures in recent memory, although their cohesion clearly remains untested. While the National Reconciliation Council (CRN) of Albert Zafy has been toiling fruitlessly towards the same goal for several months now, the closure of VIVA has focused minds, and may have been a step too far for an administration already enjoying sharply waning popularity. The sudden embrace of direct confrontation is in part due to the fact that Rajoelina may see this as part of a plot to replace his

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position of elected mayor with an appointed "President de Delegation Speciale" (PDS, which already exist in three other Malagasy cities); in this version, he has little to lose.

¶11. (C) The very fact that Rajoelina at 35 is too young to seek the presidency in 2011 (the constitution requires the president to be 40) adds additional credibility to his claim merely to be promoting democracy, human rights, and rule of law. And he says all with no mention of ousting the president, holding elections, or organizing a "transition government", things frequently heard from the marginalized Zafy-led opposition still unwilling to admit its defeat in 2001-2 and 2006. As fact slowly distills itself from rumor concerning the arrest warrants, possible planned rallies for December 20, and other next steps, the country is watching to see what the President will do next. From our perspective, the VIVA closure was already a major GOM blunder that only strengthened public support for the embattled Mayor and tarnished Madagascar's image internationally. Arresting the popular Mayor would represent an enormous leap beyond even last week's miscue, but we don't exclude anything as the President increasingly shows little patience for his emerging rival and his growing group of supporters. END COMMENT.

MARQUARDT